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Data Access Research Task Force
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The Montana Office of Public Instruction (OPI) created the Data Access Research Task Force (DART) with the overall goal of discovering ways to improve the data collection mechanisms and processes utilized both by the OPI and the school districts in Montana. The information gathered from the project will be incorporated into process improvement efforts within the OPI and the SLDS K20 grant activities. One of the objectives of the SLDS K20 grant is to improve the data collection infrastructure in order to ease the burden of data submission to the OPI on the schools and districts in Montana.

The DART project began with an electronic survey sent out to 414 district clerks and student information system specialists. The OPI received 173 responses to this survey. The DART project also sent an electronic survey to 77 recipients within OPI and 61 responses were returned. The DART Project Team followed up with phone or video interviews with 19 districts to get additional information. Rose International, the contractor assisting with the DART project, then created a report to the OPI which included issues and recommendations that were identified as a result of this work. The issues are summarized below, along with the potential solutions that the OPI has identified and will work towards.

Issue #1 – Redundancy: There were two different issues regarding redundancy brought up by districts. The first issue was how the OPI collects data – districts feel that they provide the same data about their students and employees multiple times within one OPI application or system. The second issue is that the districts feel that they are providing their data multiple times to multiple programs throughout the agency, which is also a frustration.

Response - The OPI will undertake an agency-wide inventory and analysis of applications and data collections. The OPI will move toward identifying one source for data and using that source to pre-populate that data in other applications, so districts only enter it once, but can still see what information the OPI already has.

Issue #2 - File Uploads: Many districts reported a problem with file uploads. These problems can be grouped into three types: issues with uploading data to AIM, uploading data for Special Education, and issues with file size when districts try to upload into AIM.

Response - As a result of the survey, AIM program staff worked with the AIM vendor (Infinite Campus) to resolve the file size problem and that issue has been resolved. The OPI also believes that the issue with Special Education data has been resolved at this time. In the next two years, the OPI will be working to create a new data transport method through the K20 Data Project which may be leveraged to provide new methods for file uploads to multiple applications. As part of the K20 Data Project, the OPI will also conduct interviews with high schools and K12 districts to determine additional issues with file uploads.

Issue #3 - Data Entry Errors/Inaccurate Data/Discrepancies in Data Submitted: Districts reported that at times data entry errors occur in manual data entry, and those errors move into other systems, such as the data warehouse. They also describe problems when the data reported doesn't match the data submitted to the OPI.

Response - The OPI will begin to simplify and standardize their validation and certification processes as much as possible. Where appropriate, the OPI will also convert paper data collections to electronic versions for simplification of data entry.

Issue #4 - Timeline for Data Collection: Districts feel that the OPI makes too many data requests in the fall. Superintendents and data specialists are also concerned that they will miss a deadline because they are unaware of the need for the data or have missed a notice.

Response - The OPI is in the process of creating a Master Data Calendar and is identifying ways to make this readily accessible to school district personnel. The calendar should be available to districts within the next six months. Once the calendar is developed, the OPI will identify the busy collection periods and determine if they can be spread out to ease the burden of those collections.

Issue #5 - Technical Issues: Districts identified multiple technical issues with OPI applications, including issues with Citrix, submission of data to ADC, and PowerSchool uploads to AIM.

Response - The OPI has stopped using Citrix as a portal to its applications. The ADC application has been retired. ADC data will be entered through the new TEAMS application beginning this fall. As part of the K20 Data Project, the OPI will work with High School districts to improve file extract and load processes. The team will explore using information gathered during this project to improve and/or correct the issues described with PowerSchool.

Issue #6 - Differing Submission Mechanisms: Districts feel that there are too many applications, all with different log-in information and passwords. This makes it difficult for district personnel to keep track of changing passwords and the correct log-in protocol.

Response - The OPI has begun a project to implement an identity management solution. This will offer district personnel one log-in ID and password for all OPI applications. This project is targeted to complete in mid-2014.